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ABSTRACT

Interest in the transition to parenthood has been sustained at a remarkably high level ever since LeMasters did his pioneering study in 1957. His study was interesting theoretically from the standpoint of both the family development perspective as well as Simmel's classic proposition that the triad is inherently the most unstable of human groups. But LeMaster's study also caught the interest of the lay public and most certainly of family life educators. In a period when parenthood is indeed a voluntary role, couples are understandably seeking information that will help them decide whether to parent or to continue a child-free life style. The transition can be seen as an opportunity for the couple to reorganize at an even higher level of adaptability and for the parents to rework some of their own developmental tasks. Implications for the transition are drawn from the author's 1974 research and Rollins and Cannon's (1974) re-evaluation of the literature on marital satisfaction over the life cycle. (Author)

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The Transition to Parenthood and Beyond

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Symposium comments delivered at the 1975 Annual Meeting
National Council on Family Relations

Unlike Cole (1975) and Maynard (1975) I have no new data to share with you. What I do have are some ideas about what we might profitably look at in the future, especially given the practical implications of research in this area.

LeMaster's pioneering study caught the interest of the lay public and most certainly of family life educators who are routinely assigning these articles or summaries of them to their students.

In a period when parenthood is indeed a voluntary role, couples are understandably seeking information that will help them decide whether to parent or to continue a child-free life style. And couples already committed to the idea of becoming parents want to know how to make that transition as successfully as possible.

Given this frame of reference I'd like to hit three main points.

(1) Since applied people do want information that is relevant to personal decision making and will likely use this information in planning programs for clients and students, we need to establish casual connections more clearly.

We have, from the work already done in the area, some indication of what the relevant variables might be. However, we have not clearly established these variables as true facilitators. They may be by-products of a successful transition. High marital satisfaction or commitment to a parental role, for instance, may help effect a smooth transition, may be the result of a smooth transition,or may be both cause and effect in a circular chain of events. Secondly, we don't know if it is objectively observable <u>behavior</u> that makes the difference or if the crucial component is <u>perception</u> of behavior. For instance, couples who report many areas

of agreement on the Locke-Wallace report fewer negative reactions to the transition (Russell 1974). Are they, in fact, able to reach consensus in more areas of mutual concern than other couples, or do they just assume agreement because differences are not dealt with? This is important because it has implications for practice. Couple communication training (e.g. Miller, Munnally and Wackman, 1975) is becoming more and more common. Such training tends to sensitize couples to descrepant messages and to their differences before going on to negotiation. Does such sensitization ease the transition or create more turmoil? Are couples so trained better able to use what little time they have to communicate more efficiently and come to agreement - or are they simply clearer about how they differ (and possibly more dissatisfied)? In short, does communication training and the ability to clearly understand the other's point of view facilitate couple adjustment to a transition like this one?

A couple of new thoughts have come to me since I've been working on a more general model of family functioning (Russell, 1975) that could be tested out in families making this particular transition. For instance, there is some evidence to suggest that a moderate amount of flexibility in leadership patterns facilitates adjustment - at least to an artifically induced crisis (Russell, 1975). We may find that rigid adherence to a pre-parental role structure or a drastic turn-about of roles both interfere with adjustment. We need to observe how much and what types of role changes facilitate adjustment.Generalizing from the same study, we might also hypothesize that moderate (rather than very high or very low) levels of husband-wife cohesion will faciliate adjustment. So couples who have

spent a great deal of time together and have participated in a very high number of joint activities or have led rather disconnected lives would be expected to have a more difficult time adjusting to a child than couples who were used to more moderate levels of husband-wife cohesion.

(2) My second major point: since a transition period can be seen as an opportunity for growth (Glasser and Glasser, 1970) I am going to suggest that we look more closely at the payoffs involved in becoming parents as well as the problems. And I'd like to tie this point with my last major point (3) to suggest that we take more of a life-span approach to our study of parenting. Parenting involves far more than a critical transition period, and the experience may be quite different depending on the life-time goals of the parents, the point in their personal, professional, and marital careers in which parenthood is undertaken, and the social support systems available to them as parents (i.e. day care, part time jobs without loss of prestige or benefits, a cadre of parents with whom to share concerns).

Therese Benedek (1959) has referred to parenthood as a "developmental phase" and, like Erikson (1953), sees personality development as dependent upon in-depth reciprocal relationships-the parent-child relationship is one of these. She believes that in helping children to deal with their developmental tasks, parents cannot avoid re-working some of their own. Parenthood then, may present adults with the motivation to re-think their own values, explore more of the natural world around them, and to continually re-work their own identity. All this, while hard work, may (if successfully accomplished) contribute to the gratifications that parenthood brings. If there was one message that came through clearly in the author's study of the transition to parenthood (Russell , 1974), it was

the intention of the respondents to let the author know that parenthood has its rewards. Many were indignant, for instance, that the list of "problems" on the questionnaire was longer than the list of enjoyable aspects of parenthood. Some of them took the time to write notes censuring the research for its apparent bias. It could be argued that these parents were accumulating evidence to help them deal with the dissonance created by a real, live infant. But it might be wise for us to take them more seriously and attempt to document more carefully what they report on a very global, impressionistic level. We could study a group of newly-married couples, follow them longitudinally and compare those who become parents with those who do not on such variables as: aesthetic appreciation, perception of self, conception of death, level of moral perceptions, assertiveness, prejudice, and a host of other personality variables. It could be that non-parents develop alternative relationships which perform functions similar to the parent-child relationship with respect to personality development. Bernice Neugarten (1962), for instance, has documented a re-direction of energy toward inner concerns during middle age, greater self confidence, and a sense of achievement and mastery. These changes may be facilitated by parenting, but their may be other roles and relationships which are "functionally equivalent" and contribute to such personality development.

Highly educated parents report fewer gratifications from their parental role than less educated parents (Russell, 1974). One explanation for this is that with education come opportunities, training and money necessary for enjoyment of a host of stimulating and rewarding involvements (i.e. creative employment,paid entertainment, travel, costly hobbies and athletic activities). These things give educated adults a relatively

high comparison level for alternatives to parenthood. But do these alternative sources of gratification maintain themselves into later life? Many couples considering a child-free life style wonder if they will regret their choice later in life. That is, they want to know if a substantial part of the rewards of parenthood accrue later in life when, perhaps, their sources for alternative rewards are fewer and their "comparison level for alternatives" lower. In short, "will we regret it later"? At this point in time it is not clear that we have data to bring to bear upon this question.

The expectations for marriage are apparently rising. "Increasingly, individuals are seeking a relationship that will provide growth for them as individuals and as a couple. More than a companionship marriage as defined by Burgess, there is a search for an authentic and mutually actualizing relationship" (Olson, 1972, 390). The possibility that children may "dilute" the intimacy of marriage is of concern to some. Veevers (1974), for instance, reports this as one reason for couples in her sample choosing not to have children.

While Russell (1974) has suggested that the gratifications of intial parenthood are more likely to accrue to the parents as persons than to the marriage relationship, the "dilution of intimacy" effect within the marriage may not be great. Rollins and Cannon (1974), in their recent reevaluation of the literature on marital satisfaction over the life cycle, assert that "the practical importance of the (U-shaped) trend... is very minimal" (p. 280). While there is a drop in marital satisfaction during the child-dependent years, the mean scores during even the lowest stages were still relatively high. Furthermore, Rollins and Cannon (1974) found that ninety-two percent of the variation in marital satisfaction was

unrelated to the family life cycle. They suggest that role strain may more adequately explain the U-shaped relationship found between the family life cycle and marital satisfaction. In terms of the transition to parenthood, this suggests that any drop in marital satisfaction may be related to the increasing number of normatively prescribed tasks the parents expect of one another. If one partner experiences role strain and has difficulty meeting the new expectations, his spouse is also likely to experience stress, whcih will lower marital satisfaction. The practical implication, then, becomes one of regulating role strain and "role discrepancy" during the child-dependent years, not necessarily avoiding parenthood altogether. The problem is not the child, but what the parents expect of one another as they take on the additional role of parent.

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